

# State official to rule on library

## Panel urges denial of Westfield's plans for new facility



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Supporters of building a new library in Westfield may have won a signature battle for their cause, but opponents of the project are a step closer to victory in their fight to squelch it.

Thursday, the state's Tax Control Board recommended the Department of Local Government Finance commissioner deny the \$16.9 million bond for the library -- a move that would force the Library Board to start over with its plans to build three miles north of downtown.

The vote came during the tax board's first meeting after passage of new property tax legislation.

Tax board members, who voted 4-1 to recommend denial, called costs for the project astronomical at about \$300 per square foot, and some said the ensuing tax increase -- from the current 4 cents per \$100 assessed value this year to about 6 cents next year -- would be too high.

They also heeded concerns from Westfield City Council members Robert Horkay, Ken Kingshill and Melody Sweat, who spoke against the project.

"(Library Board members) are an appointed body. I am an elected official," Kingshill said during an impassioned speech to the panel. "Most of us who are accountable to taxpayers do not want this bond now."

The decision came as a hit to the Westfield Washington Library Board, which has discussed the need for a new library since 2004 and won a petition drive to build it at the proposed location.

Also during the meeting, library director Sheryl Sollars advocated for its need for more space.

She said the population of Washington Township, which the library serves, has more than doubled since 1994, when the library last expanded, and library use has grown along with it.

The library issues 150 new cards a month, and space is so tight that one employee works from a closet.

"The library is woefully inadequate," said John Dippel, a City Council member who spoke in favor of the building project. "We need a new situation."

Opponents agree, but they favor building the library in downtown Westfield, which will be redeveloped during the next 10 years. The library's proposed 10-acre site is at 196th Street and Tomlinson Road.

Supporters of the new library say delaying the project could further increase its costs, which have gone up \$624,000 since the remonstrance halted it last May. They said they looked for other locations for the library, but building downtown would be more expensive.

Under an interlocal agreement, the library would get the land north of downtown and about \$1 million from Westfield Washington Schools, which would take over the current library.

"If funding was not an issue, I would support building the library downtown," said Steve Reitmeyer, a Library Board member who also sits on the Grand Junction Task Force, a group that is planning the downtown renovation.

Kingshill said it would make more financial sense to build the library in a few years, when Westfield leaders say tax rates will be lower.

"The state says local government must control spending," Kingshill said. "If this isn't a 'duh' moment, I don't know what is."

Whether Local Government Finance Commissioner Cheryl Musgrave agrees will determine the library's fate.

Mary Jane Michalak, a spokeswoman for the department, said the commissioner has approved projects that the board recommended she deny.

"She really does take these into consideration on a case-by-case basis," Michalak said. "The ultimate goal is to approve a project that's financially responsible while still allowing a community to meet its needs."